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ABSTRACT

Designed to facilitate communication and understanding among college students of diverse ethnic backgrounds, the Building Bridges Program at Shippensburg University (Pennsylvania) used trained student facilitators to lead classroom discussions about intergroup relations. In addition, these minority and majority facilitators shared personal experiences of prejudice with their peers. Discussions took place during regular class periods in relevant courses taught by professors who expressed an interest in the program. During the program's first semester, trained facilitators (a mix of sophomores, juniors, and seniors) led 25 in-class discussions on racial and diversity issues. Later, a telephone survey assessed the impact of the program. Subjects, 53 randomly selected majority students (of whom 20 served as a control group) were called either before or after participating in the program. Subjects were told only that the survey was on racial issues--they were not informed that it was related to the Building Bridges Project--and they were asked to respond to 10 statements, with responses ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Taken as a whole, results indicated that the program was effective. It seems to have made students more optimistic about intergroup understanding, more comfortable interacting with minority students, more likely to perceive minority students as willing to interact with White students, and less likely to perceive minority students as unqualified to be at the university. Findings suggest that a future expansion of the program would be in order. (A data graph is attached.) (NKA)

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Effects of Participation in an Intergroup Communication Program:

An Assessment of Shippensburg University's Building Bridges Program

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Effects of Participation in an Intergroup Communication Program

The Building Bridges Program at Shippensburg University was designed to build bridges of communication and understanding among Shippensburg students of diverse ethnic backgrounds. In this program, trained student facilitators, including both minority and majority students, lead classroom discussions about intergroup relations and share personal experiences of prejudice with their peers. These discussions take place during regular class periods in relevant courses taught by professors who have expressed an interest in the program.

During the first semester in which the Building Bridges Program was formalized, thirteen trained student facilitators led 25 in-class discussions on racial and diversity issues, involving 450 students. An average of five facilitators (three or four of them minority students) were present at each discussion. In each of these one to three hour sessions, minority and majority students asked questions and shared perceptions with one another. The facilitators were a mix of sophomores, juniors, and seniors, and included seven African-American students (one of whom was also Native American), two Latino students, one Asian-American student, and three majority students (one of whom was an international student from Northern Ireland). The program was conceived and coordinated by one minority faculty member (the director of Minority Student Affairs) and one majority faculty member (an assistant professor in the psychology department). Students in good academic standing who had exhibited effective social skills, maturity, and high self-esteem, were selected by the program coordinators to serve as facilitators. Facilitators were required to commit to leading ten to twelve sessions during the semester.

The student facilitators participated in an intensive one-day training program led by the program coordinators. The purpose of the training was to provide a context in which facilitators would get to know one another and to maximize their effectiveness in leading discussions. A major portion of the training was a workshop dealing with topics such as effective listening, nondefensive communication of feelings, dealing with difficult group members (e.g. one person who wants to dominate the discussion), and creating a supportive and open atmosphere. During several role play sessions, students learned to deal with situations

that might typically arise. Additional training and support were provided in a feedback session after all facilitators had led at least one in-class discussion.

Prior to each Building Bridges in-class discussion, the host professor collected anonymous questions and topics that the students wanted to discuss. The questions and topics were compiled and distributed to the facilitators before the discussion. At the beginning of each session, the facilitators introduced themselves and the explained the purpose of the Building Bridges program. Students were encouraged to express any opinion and were reassured that no honest question was too offensive or controversial. The list of anonymous questions and topics was then used to get discussion going.

Informal comments about the Building Bridges Program from students and professors were overwhelmingly positive. However, we also wanted to provide a means of more formally and objectively evaluating the effectiveness of the program. The purpose of the study reported here was to assess the impact of the Building Bridges in-class discussions on majority students who participated in the program. We used a telephone survey to examine the impact of the program on majority students' attitudes regarding race-related issues and their perceptions of minority students.

Method

Subjects

The subjects for this telephone survey were 53 majority undergraduate students at Shippensburg University. Although 66 students were selected to participate in the study, twelve were never at home or did not have a current phone number listed with the university, and one refused to participate. Subjects for the Building Bridges group were 33 students randomly selected from approximately 200 names on class lists from three general education classes in which Building Bridges discussions were held. Subjects in the control group were 20 students randomly selected from approximately 200 names from the same three classes, but were from different sections of these classes that had not included Building Bridges discussions. With one exception, the professors for these classes were not aware of the survey. There were two cases in which a student who was selected had already participated in the program in

another class; in these cases, we substituted his or her name with the next name on the class list.

Procedure

Within the Building Bridges group, subjects were randomly assigned to be called either before or after participating in the program. We did not call the same students both before and after the program in order to avoid the reactive effects of retesting. Within the control group, subjects were randomly assigned to be called either before or after the other section of their class had participated in the Buildng Bridges program. Thus, the study had a 2 (Group: Building Bridges vs. Control) X 2 (Time: Before vs. After) design. Subjects who were called before the program were contacted within the week prior to their participation. Subjects who were called after the program were contacted between one and four weeks after their participation.

All subjects were called by one of two female majority students who were blind to the subjects' group and time. Callers were simply given lists of names and phone numbers and deadlines for contacting each person.

In order to avoid demand effects, subjects were not informed that the survey was related to the Building Bridges Program. Subjects were told (truthfully) that the caller was conducting a survey on racial issues for a class project, and that they had been randomly selected to participate. After the caller confirmed that a subject was a majority student, she asked the subject to respond to each of ten statements by indicating *strongly disagree* (1), *disagree* (2), *slightly disagree* (3), *neutral or don't know* (4), *slightly agree* (5), *agree* (6), or *strongly agree* (7). The caller recorded the subject's responses on a written questionnaire. The ten statements used in the survey were (in the order presented to subjects):

Affirmative action is reverse discrimination.
Most minorities on this campus are not qualified to be here.
I feel comfortable approaching minority students on this campus.
I feel comfortable talking to minority students about racial issues.
Shippensburg University should do more to recruit minority students to attend this university.
The presence of minority students on this campus contributes to my learning experience at this university.
We have enough minority students on this campus.
Since coming to college, I have gained a greater understanding of racial/diversity issues.
Minority students on this campus aren't willing to interact with white students.
Blacks and Whites will probably never understand each other.

Results

Data from the telephone survey were analyzed using a two-way, 2 (Group: Building Bridges vs. Control) X 2 (Time: Before vs. After), between subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA). The dependent variables were subjects' responses to each of the ten statements. For some dependent variables, follow-up analyses were conducted using one-way ANOVAs to compare attitudes before and after the program within each group and to compare the two groups' attitudes at each time (before the program and after the program).

Most minorities on this campus are not qualified to be here.

There was a marginally significant Group x Time interaction for agreement that most minorities on campus are not qualified to be there, $F(1, 52) = 3.61$, $p = .0633$. Further analyses showed that, among the Building Bridges group, there was significantly more agreement before the program that minorities are not qualified ($M = 2.4$) than after the program ($M = 1.4$), $F(1, 31) = 4.30$, $p = .0465$. No such difference occurred among the control group, $F(1,18) = 0.78$, $p = .3874$; if anything, the control group agreed more with the statement over time ($M = 2.1$ before, $M = 3.0$ after). In addition, there was no difference between the two groups before the program ($M = 2.4$ for Building Bridges, $M = 2.1$ for control),$F(1, 28) = 0.20$, $p = .6601$; but after the program, the Building Bridges group agreed significantly less ($M = 1.4$) than the control group ($M = 3.0$) that minorities are not qualified, $F(1, 21) = 7.55$, $p = .0120$

I feel comfortable approaching minority students on this campus.

There was a significant main effect for time, showing that regardless of group, subjects felt more comfortable about approaching minority students before the program ($M =6.2$) than after the program ($M = 5.3$), $F(1, 52) = 5.86$, $p = .0193$. Additional analyses showed that this decline in comfort was strongest and significant for the control group ($M = 6.8$ before, $M = 5.7$ after), $F(1,18) = 6.64$, $p = .0190$, and was only a trend for the Building Bridges group ($M = 5.8$ before, $M = 5.1$ after), $F(1, 31) = 2.03$, $p = .1640$.

There was also a significant main effect for Group, showing that regardless of time, the Building Bridges group felt significantly less comfortable ($M = 5.5$) than the control group ($M = 6.4$) about approaching minority students, $F(1, 52) = 5.20$, $p = .0269$. Additional analyses

showed that before the program, the Building Bridges group felt significantly less comfortable (M = 5.8) than the control group (M = 6.8), $F(1, 28) = 6.24$, $p = .0187$; but there was no significant difference between the two groups after the program (M = 5.1 for Building Bridges, M = 5.7 for control), $F(1, 21) = 1.03$, $p = .3228$.

Minority students on this campus aren't willing to interact with white students.

There was a significant Group x Time interaction for agreement that minority students are not willing to interact with white students, $F(1, 52) = 4.04$, $p = .0499$. Follow-up analyses showed that among the control group, subjects agreed with this statement significantly more after the program (M = 3.6) than before the program (M = 2.0), $F(1,18) = 7.86$, $p = .0117$. However, no such difference occurred among the Building Bridges group, $F(1, 31) = 0.20$, $p = .6552$; if anything, the Building Bridges group agreed less with the statement over time (M = 3.6 before, M = 3.3 after). In addition, before the program, the Building Bridges group agreed significantly more (M = 3.6) than the control group (M = 2.0) that minorities aren't willing to interact with whites, $F(1, 28) = 7.42$, $p = .0110$, but there was no difference between the two groups after the program (M = 3.3 for Building Bridges, M = 3.6 for control), $F(1, 21) = 0.13$, $p = .7179$.

Blacks and Whites will probably never understand each other.

One-way ANOVAs showed that there was a marginally significant difference between the Building Bridges group and the control group before the program, $F(1, 28) = 3.16$, $p = .0863$; before the program, the Building Bridges group agreed somewhat more (M = 3.1) than the control group (M = 2.1) that Blacks and Whites will probably never understand each other. However, after the program, there was absolutely no difference between the two groups in their agreement with this statement (M = 2.3 for Building Bridges and for control), $F(1, 21) = 0.00$, $p = .9638$. There was also a tendency for the Building Bridges group to agree less that Blacks and Whites will never understand each other after the program (M = 2.3) than before the program (M = 3.1), $F(1, 31) = 2.15$, $p = .1531$, whereas there was no such trend for the control group (M = 2.1 before, M = 2.3 after), $F(1,18) = 0.13$, $p = .7268$.

Affirmative action is reverse discrimination

There was a trend toward a Group x Time interaction for agreement that affirmative action

is reverse discrimination, $F(1, 52) = 1.93$, $p = .1712$. This reflects the fact that, over time, the control group tended to agree more with the statement ($M = 3.5$ before, $M = 4.3$ after), whereas the Building Bridges group tended to agree less with the statement over time ($M = 4.1$ before, $M = 3.4$ after).

Other dependent variables

No significant effects, marginally significant effects, or trends were found for the remaining dependent variables, although the direction of differences looked promising for statements about recruiting more minority students and judgments of whether or not Shippensburg has enough minority students.

Discussion

Taken as a whole, the results of the telephone survey provide good evidence for the effectiveness of the first semester of the Building Bridges program. The program seems to have made students more optimistic about intergroup understanding, more comfortable interacting with minority students, more likely to perceive minority students as willing to interact with White students, and less likely to perceive minority students as unqualified to be at the university. The program may have also produced slightly more positive attitudes toward affirmative action.

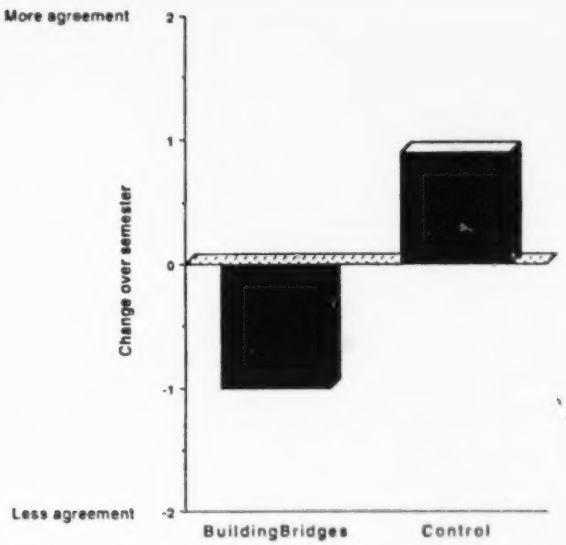
In assessing the impact of the program, we tried to use for comparison a control group of students who were as similar as possible to the students in the Building Bridges group. However, the data showed that, compared to the students in the control group, the students in the Building Bridges group actually started out with more negative attitudes toward minority students on a number of measures. Thus, the program had a positive impact even though we unintentionally selected less "receptive" students to participate in the program.

One reason for including the control group was to assess naturally occuring changes in students' attitudes over time, and to compare those changes (or lack of changes) with the pattern observed in the Building Bridges group. The data from the control group revealed that, without the intervention of the Building Bridges program, students' attitudes toward minority students actually became significantly more negative over time. The Building Bridges program was

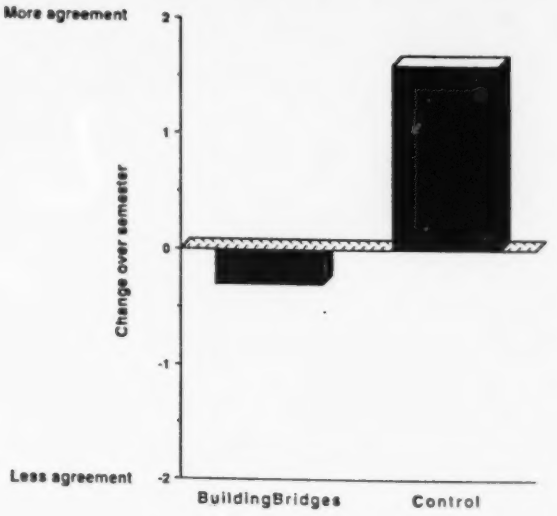
successful in eliminating or reversing increases in negative attitudes toward minority students that would normally occur, and the program did this with students who started out with especially negative attitudes toward minorities.

Our subjective impressions of the Building Bridges program were confirmed with the more objective results of this telephone assessment survey. We are enthusiastic about greatly expanding the program to reach a much larger number of students in future semesters.

"Most minorities on this campus are not qualified to be here"



"Minority students aren't willing to interact with White students"



"Blacks and Whites will never understand each other"